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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
"*****"

Just when we thought that nature might have decided to make winter wind down a bit, we're getting hit with one helluva snowstorm at the moment. It's been snowing all day, and who knows when it's going to stop. I've given up paying much attention to the local weather prognosticators,; they just rarely ever get it right. All I know is that I'll wake up in the morning and have to drag out the snowblower and clean everything up. I truly hope that this is the last wintry hurrah for the season!

I've been spending most of this past week taking care of a lot of red tape pertaining to our recent two fender benders. The insurance forms are still coming in, adjusters coming by to check out damages, and all of the rest of the related stuff. On top of all that, we picked up a "new" truck during the Presidents' Day sale. More red tape, but that's pretty much all taken care of at the moment.

And speaking of red tape, we got the last of our paperwork completed in order for us to submit our applications for our firearms permits. We were waiting for the last couple of items - some references that are required to accompany the applications. We turned everything in today, and got a phone call from our local PD later in the day. We have an "interview" meeting Sunday night. Apparently we'll be going through a battery of ID and background checks. Included in all of this will be a session of digital fingerprinting and other related stuff. I hear that this process is pretty involved, but necessary. Then we wait.

So, I just looked out the window and this snow seems to be coming down much harder than an hour ago. So much for the weather man's forecast that this storm would be over soon!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well sir, as I sit here typing this, the

snow is coming down at a pretty good clip, and it's showing no sign of letting up. It's one of those days where you're happy that you can just look out the window and be happy that you're not out on the road.

Of course, if you ARE out on the road, it's a different story. I've never been crazy about driving in the snow, but these days, between the city trucks seem to simply 'do laps' around town, waiting until they hit overtime to drop their plows, and all the Einstein Society members out there figuring that the fact that their car has anti-lock breaks should enable them to do 90 miles an hour in a half-foot of snow, I find it hard to get psyched about it.

Since I'm out of work, and since my wife had today off, we went grocery shopping this morning, before the snow built up too much on the roads.

I've always hated grocery shopping. I dislike it so much that, the first year we were married, I'd go skipping up and down the aisles behind my wife, squeaking out, "ooh ooh! Can we get this? Can we get this?"

Yeah, you're right. It didn't work. I still go grocery shopping with her most of the time.

Anyway, the people in grocery stores early mornings during snow storms are even dumber than people in grocery stores any other time. You know the type... the ones that stop right in the center of the aisle, without a thought to anyone who might be behind them, and stare blankly at a spot about three inches above whatever item is on the top shelf.

And the ones who have to bring their kids because school has been called off... oh, those are my favorites. With the added inconvenience of having to have their runny-nosed little prodigies with them, it's almost impossible for the dear things to juggle their styrofoam coffee cups and their cell phones. And I expect 'em to be able to SHOP too? I guess I just ask too much. [grin]

Well, enough of my ranting. Let's get to the news, hints, tips and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Rodolphe Czuba posts [and I've neatened up the grammar a bit]:

"I am thinking about producing a new batch of CT63 (30 units). Actually I'm waiting for some answers from factories, assembler and distributors to check if it is possible for the same price (320 EUR).

I will inform you shortly."

'James D' tells Rodolphe:

"Great news. The CT63 can fit inside a standard falcon case (with an external ATX power supply)?"

'Calimero' tells James:

"Take a look at this! <http://ct60.dhs.nu/evlct63/>

If you need some more info just ask!"

James asks:

"It's probably been asked before but what is the maximum screen resolution/colours can be achieved with this setup or can you add something else. (to still fit in the case though)?"

Calimero adds:

"I plan also to fit CT63 to standard case (when I get mine!) at minibox.com you can buy this picoPSU... and you can also take a look at DHS bbs - there is lot of information. www.dhs.nu - ct60 bbs "

PeP adds his(?) thoughts:

"If it wasn't for the CT60, I wouldn't have returned to the platform. I wouldn't have learned how to use Unix stuff, I wouldn't have learned the C programming language, in fact I would most probably never have returned to programming at all.

It's worth every penny. I'd pay twice the price, even. Get one and live happily forever after. You owe it to your Atari."

Last week, someone (Sam F. maybe?) posted this about their IDE connector:

"My Falcon's ide header (where the ide ribbon cable plugs onto the motherboard) is loose, thus causing bus errors or just flat out not accessing the ide drive.

I sent an email to ATY Computers but they replied saying they don't do component repairs anymore due to a lack of parts, and if they did work on it, the fee would start out at \$300.00.

I also sent the same email to Wizztronics, but have yet to receive an answer. So, my question to you all is, what should I do now. I live in Virginia, so am reluctant to send it to Rodolphe Czuba, shipping would be horrendous! Thanks all and have a great day!"

Edward Baiz replies:

"Have you tried Best Electronics?"

Sam replies:

"Yes, they told me they pretty much stopped doing component repairs due to scarceness of parts, and that any repairs done would start at \$300.00.

I am in contact with Wizztronics, all I have to do is pack up my Falcon

sysboard and send it to them."

Ronald Hall adds:

"Have you tried Alex Yu at ATY Computers? He's done a lot of work for me and the prices were very reasonable."

Sam replies:

"Yeah, but they told me 'Because of the type of motherboard (SMT) we do not repair any Falcon Computers / Falcon motherboards Sam. You might try Steve at Wizztronics'.

So that's what I'm going to do. Wizztronics said that they've also installed/repared CT60s, so that's a definite plus.

Might cost more to repair than sending it to Rodolphe, but it pretty much works out the same due to the costs of round trip shipping to France."

While we're on the subject, 'Atarinut' asks about the CT60:

"Please refresh my memory.....the CT60 hardwired, is plug and play yes? That is to say, the Falcon should just start up with no problems correct?"

Well folks, that's it for this week. I know it's short, but there just aren't a lot of messages in the NewsGroup this week... again. While I'm not holding my breath for it, I hope that things pick up soon. We'll see how things go next week. Until then, keep your ears open so you'll hear what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Street Fighter IV News!
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                                Wii Fitness Game!
                                And more!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Street Fighter IV Focuses On Strategy, Nostalgia

Lining up for an hour and a half is a long wait to pick a fight. But for those in the arcade and gaming industry, the global unveiling of Street Fighter IV, the first new version of the classic fighting game in nearly eight years, was a chance not only to throw a few fireballs down memory lane but also to try out some new moves.

Video game developer Capcom Co Ltd, which has brought out the new version to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the original Street Fighter's debut, says it hopes to draw back old fans of game and hopefully their kids as well.

To that end, Street Fighter IV is most like Street Fighter II, the most popular version of the game that was released in the early 1990s, with the emphasis more on tactics and strategy than difficult gameplay techniques.

"Later Street Fighters became complicated and were very expert-focused. This is more accessible but still with plenty in it for experts," said Seth Killian, a Capcom events organizer and former Street Fighter champion.

A new Street Fighter movie is also in the works, rumored to star actress Kristin Kreuk, best known for her role as Lana Lang in the Superman TV series Smallville.

The game, in which characters with their own special moves fight other combatants, has a six button layout that allows players to throw light, medium or hard punches and kicks.

In Street Fighter IV, old favorites dominate the character ranks like martial arts expert Ryu and power-kicking Chun-Li but it also has two new characters - Abel, a judo player and Crimson Viper, a special agent who uses technology to harness fire and electricity.

In addition to the nostalgic fireballs and flying dragon punches, there are new moves like the "focus attack," which gives a character some invulnerability while allowing them to attack with a special move.

It also has a revenge meter so that players that are hit too much can come back with an "ultra combo" attack.

"It's hard to say whether it is going to be a hit product or not but it did bring back a lot of memories," said Koji Hidaka, a games vendor for arcades, after giving the new game a go at the Tokyo arcade expo.

The game, which is still in development, is due to be released to arcades in Japan this summer. Capcom has not yet announced when it will be launched overseas or which home video consoles will have the game.

'Turok' A Typical Shooter Game - But With Dinosaurs

While not as groundbreaking as the original late 1990s "Turok: Dinosaur Hunter" for the Nintendo 64, the new "Turok" 3-D shooter for the Microsoft Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation 3 delivers a fun - and at times,

nail-biting - action experience for mature players.

'Turok' stays the course for shooter games, not offering many new features.

"Turok" once again stars a futuristic American Indian soldier, Joseph Turok, who crash lands on a mysterious planet populated by vicious dinosaurs and a malicious military organization.

Along with help provided by his squad mates, who don't trust our Mohawk-sporting hero to begin with, Turok must stay alive long enough to accomplish his mission and get off this dangerous world.

In "Turok," which is played from a first-person perspective, you'll face off against a handful of meat-eating beasts, such as Tyrannosaurus rex and velociraptors.

In one memorable scene about three hours into the game, all seemed clear so Turok climbed a ladder to reach the top of a lookout point when all of a sudden he was yanked to the ground by two raptors. Interestingly, this wasn't a scripted event.

When the scene was played out again, Turok made it to the top alive, only to look down and see the dinosaurs chasing each other a dozen feet away from the base of the ladder.

Fun scenes like this are memorable, as are the bigger boss fights, but the core game play doesn't deviate much from other 3-D shooters: you'll be accomplishing missions, such as gaining entrance into a facility by taking down those who stand in your way.

Score: 3.5 stars (out of 5)
Rating: Mature
Platforms: Xbox 360, Playstation 3
Publisher: Touchstone
Price: \$59.99

As Turok you'll have access to all kinds of weaponry, such as automatic rifles, shotguns, dual-wielding handguns, sniper rifles, grenades, rocket launchers, a combat knife and bow and arrow (the latter two are ideal for stealthier attacks).

"Turok" also offers a few "context-sensitive" moments, where you must press the correct button repeatedly, according to the on-screen icon. This might be to open heavy doors, preventing a dinosaur from eating you by opening its mouth wide enough to escape, or performing a quiet kill with your combat knife.

The developers at Propaganda Games did a good job creating a lush, green world in which to hide, explore and fight, while the dinosaurs move smoothly and enjoy high-resolution scaly textures.

Along with the single-player campaign, "Turok" also features a number of online-only maps for up to 16 players via Xbox Live or the PlayStation Network. Multiplayer game modes include traditional "Deathmatch" and "Capture-the-Flag" varieties, a mission-based war game (such as "defend your base") and a fun co-op mode where players can form a squad and battle another team of human players.

"Turok" is a very good but not great game. Yes, it delivers some

entertaining thrills, yet it doesn't compare to the recent batch of extraordinary 3-D shooters on the market such as "BioShock," "The Orange Box," "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" or "Halo 3." As a result, it might be worth checking out the playable demo first, available as a download on both consoles, before deciding to drop \$60 on this disc.

Microsoft To Release "Gears" Sequel in November

Microsoft Corp will release a sequel to blockbuster "Gears of War" video game in November, giving it another key title to help fend off Sony Corp's PlayStation 3, the game's creator said on Wednesday.

"Gears of War 2" would be released for Microsoft's Xbox 360 in time for the year-end holiday shopping season, Cliff Bleszinski, lead game designer for Gears creator Epic Games, told the Game Developers Conference.

The original "Gears" was released in November 2006 to strong critical acclaim, sold 3 million copies in its first 10 weeks, and boosted sales of Xbox 360 hardware.

Nintendo Rolls Out Wii Fitness Game Product

Games maker Nintendo Co Ltd on Wednesday said it will launch a new physical fitness game product called Wii Fit for U.S. shipping in May.

The Wii Fit, which will debut on May 19, will come with a weight-and-motion sensing device called the Wii Balance Board, the company said in a statement.

Nintendo is also planning to launch a new online service in the U.S. in May called WiiWare that will allow game publishers to distribute new titles over the Internet directly to users, instead of on discs.

Early WiiWare games will come from developers such as Square Enix, famous for the role-playing game franchise "Final Fantasy."

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

The Web is Dangerous, Google Warns

The Web is scarier than most people realize, according to research published recently by Google.

The search engine giant trained its Web crawling software on billions of Web addresses over the past year looking for malicious pages that tried to attack their visitors. They found more than 3 million of them, meaning that about one in 1,000 Web pages is malicious, according to Neils Provos, a senior staff software engineer with Google.

These Web-based attacks, called "drive-by downloads" by security experts, have become much more common in recent years as firewalls and better security practices by Microsoft have made it harder for worms and viruses to directly attack computers.

In the past year the Web sites of Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" movie and the Miami Dolphins were hacked, and the MySpace profile of Alicia Keys was used to attack visitors.

Criminals are getting better at this kind of work. They have built very successful automated tools that poke and prod Web sites, looking for programming errors and then exploit these flaws to install the drive-by download software. Often this code opens an invisible iFrame page on the victim's browser that redirects it to a malicious Web server. That server then tries to install code on the victim's PC. "The bad guys are getting exceptionally good at automating those attacks," said Roger Thompson, chief research officer with security vendor Grisoft.

In response, Google has stepped up its game. One of the reasons it has been scouring the Web for malicious pages is so that it can identify drive-by-download sites and warn Google searchers before they visit them. Nowadays about 1.3 percent of all Google search queries list malicious results somewhere on the first few pages.

Some of the data surprised Provos.

"When we started going into this I had the firm intuition that if you go to the sleazier parts of the Web, you are in more danger," he said.

It turns out the Web's nice neighborhoods aren't necessarily safer than its red-light districts.

"We looked into this and indeed we found that if you ended up going to adult-oriented pages, your risk of being exposed [to malicious software] was slightly higher," he said. But "there really wasn't a huge difference."

"Staying away from the disreputable part of the Internet really isn't good enough," he noted.

Another interesting finding: China was far and away the greatest source of malicious Web sites. According to Google's research, 67 percent of all malware distribution sites are hosted in China. The second-worst offender? The U.S., at 15 percent, followed by Russia, (4 percent) Malaysia (2.2 percent) and Korea (2 percent).

It costs next-to-nothing to register a Web domain in China and service providers are often slow to shut down malicious pages, said Thompson. "They're the Kleenex Web sites," he said. Criminals "know they're going to be shut down, and they don't care."

Malicious site operators in China fall into two broad categories, Thompson said: fraudsters looking to steal your banking password, and teenagers who want to steal your World of Warcraft character.

So how to stop this growing pestilence?

Google's Provos has this advice for Web surfers: Turn automatic updates on. "You should always run your software as updated as possible and install some kind of antivirus technology," he said.

But he also thinks that Webmasters will have to get smarter about building secure Web sites. "I think it will take concentrated efforts on all parts," for the problem to go away, he said.

Cold-Boot Attack Can Crack Disk Encryption

Encrypting your hard drive has been touted as the ultimate in data protection. But new research shows that a savvy attacker with a can of compressed air and good timing can access encryption keys used by Vista's BitLocker, the Mac's FileVault, and other well-known encryption tools - and then your data.

While a computer is running, data and the encryption keys used by full-disk encryption systems are held in dynamic random-access memory. Researchers at Princeton University's Center for Information Technology Policy took advantage of the fact that data persists on DRAM modules even when a computer is turned off.

Researcher Ed Felten wrote on his blog, "Virtually everybody, including experts, will tell you that DRAM contents are lost when you turn off the power. But this isn't so."

The data in DRAM modules persists only for a minute or less at room temperature, but the decay of data can be significantly slowed by using an air-spray duster to cool the chips (a few sprays can lower the temperature to -50 degrees Celsius). Then, with specialized software, "someone could carry out our attacks against a target computer in a matter of minutes," Felten wrote. The Princeton team did not disclose the source code or software used in the cold-boot attack.

"Most disk-encryption systems can be defeated if the computer is stolen or accessed while it is in sleep mode or in a password-protected screen saver," Felten wrote. Vista's BitLocker "is also sometimes vulnerable even when the computer is completely off."

Microsoft acknowledged that the attack could occur. "Like all full-volume encryption products, BitLocker has a key in memory when the system is running in order to encrypt/decrypt data on the fly for the drive(s) in use. If a system is in 'sleep mode' it is, in effect, still running," Microsoft said in a statement provided to NewsFactor.

Encryption vendor PGP was not mentioned in the report, but CTO Jon Callas told NewsFactor that "though this is primarily a hardware attack, PGP's Whole Disk Encryption functionality could be as vulnerable as any other vendor's full-disk encryption products." The company has asked the publishers of the report how it can protect against this type of attack.

"The most effective way for users to protect themselves is to fully shut down their computers several minutes before any situation in which the computers' physical security could be compromised," according to a FAQ.

Other suggested measures such as using "epoxy to frustrate attempts to remove or access" DRAM modules are likely to be beyond the means - or understanding - of the average user.

Since the vulnerability lies in the way DRAM works rather than how encryption software behaves, a technical solution will take time. "This is an attack on the hardware itself, and consequently a complete solution must come from hardware. Software solutions can make the situation better, but cannot completely correct this," Callas said.

Common-sense measures, like not leaving your laptop unattended in a public place, may do more to prevent this attack than sophisticated countermeasures. And some security experts say the cold-boot attack is low on the list of security risks.

"While the threats are real, the challenge with advanced methods like freezing chips, cracking keys, grabbing RFID data, and the fervor they set off, is that they draw attention away from what remains the biggest challenge on the security front - lack of sufficient internal controls and governance," J.R. Reagan, a vice president at BearingPoint, told NewsFactor. "An employee losing a tape, a laptop, or failing to change a password, although not as sexy and exciting, presents just as great a risk, if not greater, than tactics like cold boot."

Service Taps Users To Help Filter Sites

You can now help decide what Web sites your boss should block.

A new service from OpenDNS lets users tag sites under categories such as "gambling," "hate" and "social networking." Others can weigh in on whether they agree with those classifications. If there are enough votes, the site gets added to a system used by companies, schools and other organizations to block access.

OpenDNS says its approach is better than commercial software because more people are reviewing sites and can do so quickly as new ones pop up.

OpenDNS already has a filtering system for "phishing" scam sites using a similar, community-based approach. It contracts with a vendor, St. Bernard Software, to filter pornography sites, and those sites will not be part of the new tagging program.

The system is free to use. The filters are part of OpenDNS' main service providing the directories necessary to translate a Web site's domain name into its actual numeric Internet address. OpenDNS estimates it has more than 4 million users worldwide.

John Palfrey, a professor of Internet law at Harvard University, said community-based filtering may prove more accurate overall, but he said users aren't always right.

"And when they are wrong, the crowds can function as high-tech lynch mobs," he said. "It is frontier justice, without recourse under classical law."

Marjorie Heins, founder of the Free Expression Policy Project research group, worried that "one ideological group can impose its tastes and

ideas by stuffing the digital ballot box and labeling content that other users of the system might not think is objectionable."

OpenDNS says it has a built-in trust mechanism, giving more weight to users who have submitted accurate tags more often in the past than those who have submitted fewer tags or have never done so.

Microsoft To Authorize Yahoo Proxy Battle

Microsoft Corp will authorize a proxy battle for Yahoo Inc this week to convince the Web company's shareholders to agree on a takeover deal that the Yahoo board so far has rejected, the New York Times' DealBook blog said on Tuesday.

Quoting people briefed on the matter, the Times Web site said that Microsoft, which has been expected to raise its cash-and-stock bid originally worth \$44.6 billion, would seek to nominate a slate of directors by March 13, if Yahoo's board did not enter talks.

A Microsoft spokesman said the company had always maintained it reserves the right to exercise all options but declined to comment specifically on the DealBook report. A Yahoo spokeswoman declined to comment, saying it does not respond to rumor or speculation.

A person familiar with the matter told Reuters a proxy fight would cost about \$20 million to \$30 million, but the source was not aware of Microsoft making the decision to pursue the fight.

"Microsoft is doing the smart thing. It's giving both the carrot and the stick," said Morningstar analyst Toan Tran. "The carrot was the big premium on Yahoo stock and now the stick is the threat of a proxy fight."

Proxy fights waged by corporations to facilitate a hostile acquisition are rare and represent less than 5 percent of all proxy fights since 2001, according to data from research firm FactSet SharkWatch.

Chairman Bill Gates told Reuters on Monday that there was "nothing new" in the Yahoo takeover process. "We've sent our letter and we've reinforced that we consider that it's a very fair offer," he said.

The two companies are at a stand-off in Microsoft's unsolicited bid to acquire Yahoo. Microsoft has offered to buy Yahoo for \$31 a share in cash and stock, a bid which Yahoo's board rejected, saying it undervalued the company.

Microsoft countered by saying that its offer was "full and fair," but did not say what it planned to do next.

The deal is now worth \$41.6 billion due to the decline of value in Microsoft's stock.

The fees for paying lawyers and solicitation firms to wage a proxy fight are a fraction of what it would cost Microsoft to raise its offer. For every dollar the offer is increased, it would cost Microsoft an additional \$1.4 billion.

If Microsoft decides to launch a proxy fight, it would nominate a slate

of directors to take control of Yahoo's board and support the company's proposal. The nominees would be voted on at Yahoo's annual shareholder meeting in June.

On the other hand, Microsoft risks alienating Yahoo's rank-and-file by taking a hostile tactic. Unlike manufacturing companies with fixed assets, Yahoo's main asset to Microsoft is its engineering talent.

A hostile approach by Microsoft could lead to an exodus of talent to Google Inc or other Web rivals.

A Yahoo-Microsoft proxy fight would be the largest corporate proxy fight in the eight years FactSet SharkWatch has been tracking statistics on this, it said.

Microsoft shares fell 14 cents, or 0.5 percent, to close at \$28.17 on the Nasdaq. The stock is down 14 percent since the offer for Yahoo went public.

Shares of Yahoo dropped 65 cents, or 2.2 percent, to \$29.01. The value of Microsoft's cash and stock offer currently stands at \$28.90.

Mozilla Opens E-Mail Subsidiary

The Mozilla Foundation Tuesday opened Mozilla Messaging, a new subsidiary focused on developing its free, open-source Thunderbird e-mail software.

Mozilla Messaging will initially focus on developing Thunderbird 3, which aims at improving several aspects of the software, including integrated calendaring, better search, as well as enhancements to the overall user experience, the company said in a statement.

The Mozilla Foundation is best known for creating the Firefox Web browser, a potent rival to Microsoft's Internet Explorer. The organization enjoys wide support in the open source community because both Firefox and Thunderbird are based on the open source development model.

Mozilla Messaging will continue using the open source model in work, maintaining a small product development team to work with contributors from around the world on Thunderbird software.

David Ascher is the CEO of Mozilla Messaging and sits on its board of directors, which also includes Christopher Beard, vice president and general manager of Mozilla Labs, and Marten Mickos, CEO of open source database vendor MySQL AB.

Mozilla Messaging is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Mozilla Foundation.

Court Bans Whistle-Blower Site

A California district court has shut down a controversial Web site in the U.S. that allows whistle blowers to post corporate and government documents online anonymously.

A site known as Wikileaks.org has been taken offline in the U.S. due to a court order from the U.S. District Court in San Francisco. However, the site remains online in other countries, including Belgium and Germany.

The order in the U.S. came after a Swiss bank, Julius Baer, earlier this month filed a complaint against the site and San Mateo, California-based Dynadot, Wikileaks' domain-name registry, for posting several hundred of the bank's documents.

Some of those documents allegedly reveal that Julius Baer was involved in offshore money laundering and tax evasion in the Cayman Islands for customers in several countries, including the U.S.

The court ordered that "Dynadot shall immediately clear and remove all DNS hosting records for the wikileaks.org domain name," according to court documents. It also said that Dynadot should prevent the domain name from resolving to the wikileaks.org Web site or any other Web site or serve other than a blank park page until further notice.

A spokesman for Julius Baer could not be reached for comment Monday.

According to its Web site, the purpose of Wikileaks, founded in 2006, is to develop "an uncensorable system for untraceable mass document leaking and public analysis."

Wikileaks has been plagued by controversy since its inception, coming under fire from institutions whose confidential documents have been posted on the site and from critics who have questioned the motives of the site's founders. Still, others have praised the site for supporting the free dissemination of information.

Wikileaks posted on its international site s a press statement about the U.S. order, calling it "clearly unconstitutional" and said it "exceeds its jurisdiction."

Microsoft Opens Up, EU Is Skeptical

Microsoft Corp. said Thursday it will share more information about its products and technology in an effort to make it work better with rivals' software and meet the demands of antitrust regulators in Europe.

European Union regulators, however, expressed skepticism, saying the software maker did not address monopoly abuse in the past or allegations it seeks to undercut rivals by bundling Internet Explorer with the Windows operating system.

Microsoft said it is expanding access outside software developers have to information about the way its programs work. The software maker said it will give away documentation and computer code needed to make outside applications work together with its Office suite, Windows operating system and others. In the past, Microsoft charged for this information.

The company will still charge a patent license fee to companies that want to sell software built using this information. But Chief Software Architect Ray Ozzie described the fees as "low royalty rates."

Microsoft said it posted 30,000 pages of documents online that will help level the playing field for non-Microsoft developers, and announced it plans to add more. Bob Muglia, a senior vice president of Microsoft's server and tools business, said in an interview that those documents spell out exactly how the company's programs work together - allowing, for example, another company to build an e-mail system that works as well with Outlook as Microsoft's own Exchange Server.

Steve Ballmer, Microsoft's chief executive officer, said in a news conference that the move could boost rivals' ability to compete. But he said it also opens up Microsoft's platform for developers to build products that could keep users interested in Windows PCs - an essential ingredient if the company is going to survive an industrywide shift toward Web-based programs that don't require a particular operating system.

Ballmer said the decision will have a relatively minimal impact on Microsoft's revenue.

The software maker has spent years and millions of dollars to put together such documentation, in part in response to a decade of pressure from antitrust regulators in the U.S. and Europe. Analysts see the voluntary move by Microsoft as a way to placate the EU, which upheld a \$613 million fine against the company last year and has since opened two new investigations into Microsoft's business practices.

EU regulators appeared unimpressed by Thursday's announcement, saying they had heard it all before.

"The Commission would welcome any move toward genuine interoperability," regulators said in a statement. "Nonetheless, the Commission notes that today's announcement follows at least four similar statements by Microsoft in the past on the importance of interoperability."

The EU's newest probe into how well Microsoft's products work with others was triggered by a complaint from the European Committee for Interoperable Systems - a group representing IBM Corp., Nokia Corp., Sun Microsystems Inc., RealNetworks Inc. and Oracle Corp.

"The world needs a permanent change in Microsoft's behavior, not just another announcement," the ECIS group said in a statement. "We have heard high-profile commitments from Microsoft ... but have yet to see any lasting change in Microsoft's behavior in the marketplace."

ECIS said a real test for Microsoft will be a meeting of the International Standards Organization next week in which the software maker is expected to push its own Windows-dependent Office OOXML document format over an existing industry standard supported by IBM.

Brad Smith, Microsoft's general counsel, responded that the company never considered its past efforts to make its software work well with outside programs as a perfect solution.

"I fully believe that as people do test this proposition in the months to come, I think they're going to come away with a high regard for the steps that our engineers are taking," Smith said.

The company also announced it will open up Office programs to new file formats, and let PC users change preferences for how documents are saved.

Microsoft also said it will open an online forum to engage more with open source developers, and said it would not sue open-source software makers for "noncommercial distribution" of products built on its protocols.

"I don't think the company's suddenly about to get open-source religion," said Matt Rosoff, an analyst for the research group Directions on Microsoft. "This is an attempt to stave off further antitrust and unfair competition complaints in the EU, particularly related to Office."

Open-source mainstays echoed the analyst's skepticism.

Michael Cunningham, general counsel at Linux operating system distributor Red Hat Inc., wrote in a blog post that Microsoft's announcement "appears carefully crafted to foreclose competition from the open source community."

"The only hope for reintroducing competition to the monopoly markets Microsoft now controls - Windows, Office, etc. - is through commercial distributions of competitive open source software products," Cunningham wrote.

EU, U.S. Vow Crackdown On Computer Counterfeits

EU and U.S. senior officials said on Friday they would crack down on counterfeiting of computer components after they seized over 360,000 fake items in just two weeks in a joint operation at the end of last year.

Integrated circuits and computer components of over 40 trademarks including Intel, Cisco and Philips, worth more than \$1.3 billion, were seized during the operation, the officials said.

"Traffickers and counterfeiters have become much more sophisticated ... They are no longer confining themselves to trafficking in some of the traditional goods we used to see them in, such as footwear or handbags," U.S. Customs and Border Protection Assistant Commissioner Dan Baldwin said.

"There are increasing numbers with high-tech goods, goods that impact our critical infrastructure," Baldwin told reporters after talks with European Union counterparts in Brussels.

Integrated circuits are used in a wide range of products including computers, aircraft, cars and telecommunications.

U.S. and EU officials said both sides of the Atlantic would work with importers to see how the fakes entered their markets, launch criminal investigations and take up the matter with China, where most of the fakes came from.

"We've identified a pretty significant problem, a fairly high risk for critical infrastructure," Baldwin said. "There will be criminal investigations."

Officials could not say at this stage if the importers knew they were trading counterfeit products and whether the problem came from a few factories or was more widespread.

But he warned the problem could affect all producers and said the industry needed to cooperate better to help them identify fakes.

John Pulford, a European Commission official responsible for customs risk management, said some fakes also came from Taiwan and Hong Kong and that most arrived by air, through couriers.

The first EU-U.S. customs operation took place in several German airports including Frankfurt and Leipzig, in France's Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle airport and in Britain's Heathrow, as well as a number of hubs in the U.S., the officials said.

Pulford said it was only one of the many intellectual property rights problems the EU had with China.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the trade in pirated consumer goods has reached \$200 billion a year, equivalent to 2 percent of world trade, with many fake items coming from China.

Apostrophes In Names Stir Lot o' Trouble

It can stop you from voting, destroy your dental appointments, make it difficult to rent a car or book a flight, even interfere with your college exams.

More than 50 years into the Information Age, computers are still getting confused by the apostrophe. It's a problem familiar to O'Connors, D'Angelos, N'Dours and D'Artagnans across America.

When Niall O'Dowd tried to book a flight to Atlanta earlier this year, the computer system refused to recognize his name. The editor of the Irish Voice newspaper could book the flight only by giving up his national identity.

"I dropped the apostrophe and ran my name as 'ODowd,'" he said.

It's not just the bad luck o' the Irish. French, Italian and African names with apostrophes can befuddle computer systems, too. So can Arab names with hyphens, and Dutch surnames with "van" and a space in them.

Michael Rais, director of software development at Permission Data, an online marketing company in New York, said the problem is sloppy programming.

"It's standard shortsightedness," he said. "Most programs set a rule for first name and last name. They don't think of foreign-sounding names."

The trouble can happen in two ways, according to Rais.

One: Online forms typically have a filter that looks for unfamiliar terms that might be put in by mistake or as a joke. A bad computer system will not be able to handle an apostrophe, a hyphen or a gap in a last name and will block it immediately.

Two: Even if the computer system is sophisticated enough to welcome an O'Brien or Al-Kurd, the name must be stored in the database, where a

hyphen or apostrophe is often mistaken for a piece of computer code, corrupting the system.

That's what happened during the Michigan caucus in 2004, when thousands of O'Connors, Al-Husseins, Van Kemps and others who went to the polls didn't have their votes counted.

"It was a real slapped-together computer system the party put together and a lot of people were left out who were registered to vote, it was a real pity," said Michigan political consultant Mark Grebner.

In this year's primaries, the system worked much better, according to the Michigan Democratic Party. There have been isolated reports of problems elsewhere, but nothing on the scale of Michigan.

Still, an apostrophe, hyphen or space can interfere with medical and dental records, gym memberships, online searches or school registration.

Dutch-American proofreader Jessica van Campen has seen her name listed as Jessica Vancampen, Jessica Van, Jessicavan Campen, Jessica Campen and Jessican Kampen by uncertain computer systems. When she went to her finals in college, she was listed under Campen and was told Jessica Van Campen had dropped out of the course.

"It was another moment of panic," she said.

All of this confusion has prompted some people to surrender to technology. Iraqi immigrant Lina Alathari was once known as Lina Al-Athari, but dropped the hyphen in America. "There is no pronunciation difference, so I'm fine with it," she said.

Erin Carney D'Angelo, a lawyer in New York, was born apostrophe-free, but took one on when she married her Italian-American husband. But "he told me to drop the apostrophe when filling out forms so to computers I'm just a 'Dangelo,'" she said.

The problem is difficult to correct because computer systems have many different ways of recognizing names, Rais said.

"It depends on the form filters and it depends on the database program," he said. "Basically, there are a lot of programmers out there who forget that a growing portion of the American public are not called John Smith or Mary White."

The Irish apostrophe began with the British, who put it there because they believed the O looked odd without a link to the rest of the name. Many Gaelic speakers in Ireland refuse to carry an apostrophe, considering it a vestige of colonial days.

"Maybe that's the solution," said O'Dowd, who just last week was rejected by an online alarm clock service. "Maybe we should just drop the apostrophe altogether, not just as a nationalist statement but because I'd like my alarm call to work in the morning."

For my part, I've already thrown off my apostrophe. From now on I am Sean ODriscoll.

The world's top PC vendor, Hewlett-Packard, beat competitors Dell, Lenovo, and Apple to provide the best online customer support, according to a survey released on Tuesday by The Customer Respect Group.

HP was also rated as providing the best online customer service among a sample of 18 technology companies surveyed, ahead of Intuit, Xerox, Microsoft, and Lexmark, according to the survey, which rated online support for the first quarter of 2008.

Using metrics, including Web site usability, content accessibility, and responsiveness to queries, the survey independently measured a customer's interaction with a technology company via the Internet, the company said.

Dell lagged in 12th place behind hardware vendors HP, Lenovo, Apple, and Gateway, according to the survey. Dell has a good community site linked from the home page, but the support pages are difficult to locate, said Terry Golesworthy, president of The Customer Respect Group.

"I think the story with Dell is that they have excellent materials and content, but it is not always as usable by the more naive users," Golesworthy said. Dell needs to mature support to cater to new users without neglecting the self-service experts, Golesworthy said.

Apple's product offerings are fairly simple compared to Dell's, and so is its online support, Golesworthy said. Apple provides no chat or e-mail support options and encourages users to contact Apple through stores and by telephone to resolve issues.

Apple's message may be about being simple, but a major glitch could become a big problem as self-help provided by Apple is minimal, Golesworthy said. Apple has plenty of technical articles on its Web site, which could be hard to locate at critical times.

While some issues linger, vendors are finding better use of technologies such as RSS, online chat, e-mail, forums, and self-support Web content to support novice and expert PC users, the survey said.

Technical customers are generally well serviced on location, so companies are looking to provide more basic information to support novice PC users, Golesworthy said. The documentation on some Web sites is being aligned for novice users to first identify a problem, then download the relevant drivers and programs to solve problems.

Companies are also adopting more interactive and real-time techniques to provide customer support, the survey said. Online chat is challenging e-mail as a support option, with more than 50 percent of companies surveyed including online chat, an improvement from 30 percent six months ago.

Online chat provides quicker response, cuts down on customer support costs, and eliminates user concerns about speaking to support agents with foreign accents, Golesworthy said.

Some Web sites had data-intensive home pages that took time to load, but it could become commonplace as companies try to provide better and more interactive support to users, the survey said.

Two upcoming technologies - remote support and intelligent monitoring - could help improve customer support provided by vendors, Golesworthy said. With remote access, technicians will assume control of a machine from a remote location to fix a problem. Instead of wading through pages of content to diagnose an issue, intelligent monitoring will provide a clearer choice for users to diagnose and resolve issues.

Sun was rated as having the simplest Web site, followed by Xerox, Microsoft, and Apple. Intuit was rated as being most responsive to customers' problems, followed by Microsoft, Symantec, and HP.

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